An Emic-Etic Approach to Translating Cultural Expressions between Arabic and English

(1) ***Dr. Ali Almanna***
University of Nizwa
a_abid12@yahoo.co.uk

(2) ***Prof. Mohammed Farghal***
Kuwait University
M_farghal@hotmail.com

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Abstract: In this paper, an emic-etic approach to translating culture-specific expressions is introduced and followed. The purpose is to work out an approach to translating literary texts charged with cultural issues between Arabic and English. Data analysis shows that translators need to probe the deep symbolic levels of the language in the source text (ST) in order to capture the cultural implications meant by the author. This can be achieved only by approaching the text from an 'insider' perspective.

Keywords: Culture, Culture-specific Expressions, Emic, Etic, Insider, Outsider, Superficial Level & Symbolic Level.

الملخص: تقوم هذه الدراسة بتقديم منهج يعتمد على مقاربة خارجية وداخلية وتطبيقه في ترجمة التعابير ذات الصبغة الثقافية، وذلك من أجل الوقوف على خبايا النصوص الأدبية المشحونة بالقضايا الثقافية خلال الترجمة بين العربية والإنجليزية. ويوضّح تحليل النصوص في الدراسة أن على المترجمين تحسس المستويات الرمزية العميقة من أجل الوصول إلى ملامسة المقاصد الثقافية التي يرمي إليها المؤلف. وهذا الأمر لا يمكن تحقيقه دون نظرة تقارب النص داخلياً وخارجياً أثناء الترجمة.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the focus of translation studies has shifted from endless debates about equivalence to broader issues, including culture and its effect on both process and product of translation. Further, recent studies (cf. Snell-Hornby 1988/1995; Bassnett 1991) have shown that the translation process can no longer be seen as being merely between two linguistic systems, but is equally envisaged as being between two cultures. Snell-Hornby (1988/1995: 46), echoing Vermeer's (1986) views, holds that translation is "a cross-cultural transfer, and the translator should be bicultural, if not pluricultural". Nida (1964a: 157) defines culture as "the total beliefs and practices of a society. Words only have meaning in terms of the culture in which they are used, and although languages do not determine culture, they certainly tend to reflect a society's beliefs and practices". Culture is not "a material phenomenon", consisting of "things, people, behavior, or emotion" (Goodenough 1964: 39-40). Rather, it is

> an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. As such, the things people say and do, their social arrangements and events, are products or by-products of their culture as they apply it to the task of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances.

This entails that there should be some sort of agreement among people in a given society to accept a new belief, behavior, custom, moral, habit, emotion and so on. It is this agreement that "seems to alienate any attempt to introduce any new beliefs, emotions, behaviors, etc. which [do] not conform to the society's communal memory" (Al-Taher 2008: 60).

Katan (1999: 26), however, defines culture as a "shared mental model or map" for interpreting reality and organizing experience of the world. This model of the world, according to him, is a "system of congruent and interrelated beliefs, values, strategies and cognitive environments which guide the shared basis of behavior".

Transferring a text from one language to another will not be without difficulties, in particular when SL people and TT people conceptualize their experience of the world in a different way. Nida and Reyburn (1981: 2) hold that the difficulties that arise out of cultural differences "constitute the most serious problem for translators and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers". These cultural differences will definitely present some hurdles to translators when approaching culture-laden texts. Avoiding certain taboos, reconciling cultural clashes, satisfying certain cultural preferences and so on show how translators may suffer while finalizing the draft of the TT (Mazid 2007: 39). Such cultural asymmetries place extra efforts on the translator, requiring him/her to probe the "deep/symbolic level […] of the source language" in order to "capture the cultural implications meant by the source author" (Al-Masri 2004: 112). To this end, these cultural issues need to be dealt with from "the perspective of cultural insider" (Ibid: 112).

2. 'Emic' vs. 'Etic" Perspectives

The term 'emic' or 'insider' as opposite to 'etic' or 'outsider' was first introduced by the linguist Kenneth Pike (1954). These two terms 'etic', derived from phonetic and 'emic', derived from phonemic, were created as a response to the "need to include nonverbal behavior in linguistic description" (Pike 1990: 18; also see Al-Masri 2004: 35; Almanna 2014: 56). Building on the premise that there are two points of view that can be taken in the study of a linguistic sound system, either the insider or the outsider, Pike (Ibid) holds that in the study of a society's cultural system, there are also two perspectives that can be used. Unlike the etic approach, which shifts the focus of attention from local observations towards those of scientists', the emic approach investigates how local people think, how they perceive and map the socio-cultural experiences, how they behave, how they imagine, etc. (cf. Kottak 2006: 47; Gobo 2008; Jingfeng 2013; Mason 2014). In this regard, Mason (Ibid, p. 1) holds:

> Etic approaches involve analyzing cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who does not participate in the culture being studied [...]. In contrast, emic approaches involve investigating and explaining cultural patterns from the standpoint of one immersed within a culture.

To put it differently, the etic or outsider perspective relies on the extrinsic concepts and categories that make sense to scientific observers – it has to do next to nothing with native speakers/society members' reactions towards an issue. Therefore, in order to be able to study the intrinsic phonological distinctions that are meaningful to native speakers of a given language, one needs to do phonemic analysis. The same holds true for studying the intrinsic cultural distinctions that make sense to the members of a given society, s/he needs to adopt an emic or insider perspective.

Anderson (2003: 391) highlights the importance of taking into account both the 'etics', i.e. the superficial level of the language and 'emics', i.e. the symbolic level of the language while dealing with the text at hand. In a similar vein, Gobo (2008) concludes: "Emic knowledge is essential for the intuitive and empathic understanding of a culture, and [...] is often a valuable source of etic hypotheses". By contrast, etic knowledge "is argued to be vital for cross-cultural comparisons, because such comparison requires both unitization and categorization" (Mason 2014: 1).

To reflect such a symbolic level of language, translators adopt different local strategies. Consider the following example quoted from Mahfouz's (1961: 8) اللص والكلاب *'The Thief and the Dogs'*, translated by Le Gassick and Badawi (1984: 14): (Examples are immediately followed by literal translation in square brackets)

(1) ألم أعلّمك **الوقوف على قدمين؟**

[Didn't I teach you how to **stand on two feet**?]

(2) It was me, wasn't it, who taught you how to **stand on your own feet**.

Here, the Arabic expression *'to stand on two feet'* has a number of different meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. In this context, it does not refer to the physical activity of standing on two feet; rather it is used figuratively — it simply refers to teaching somebody how to depend on oneself (cf. Abdel-Hafiz 2003: 231). As such, the translators have succeeded in being insiders in the source culture, i.e. understanding the cultural experience in the SL, and being insiders in the target culture, i.e. encoding the cultural experience in the TL. In this example, it so happens that both languages, Arabic and English, linguistically conceptualize and utilize such a world experience in a similar way; therefore, a semi-literal translation is sufficient. However, on some occasions, the translator falls into "the trap of being a 'cognitive blinder'. That is, when the translator's over-familiarity with the source language leads him/her to assume/presuppose that the target reader is also familiar with the expression at hand (Al-Masri 2004: 140-41).

The employment of body parts in cultural expressions does not usually lend itself to literal translation where a happy coincidence occurs between the source language culture (SLC) and target language culture (TLC), as the example above shows. In several cases, the use of literal translation would fail to reach the intended metaphorical interpretation and would linger within the bounds of literalness. Witness how the translators Hutchins and Kenny (1990) have missed the cultural message in the following excerpt quoted from Mahfuz's novel بين القصرين *Bain l-Qasrayn* (1973):

(3) - كلاّ يا سيدي، إن ابني **لا يرفع عينيه** إلى جارة ولا إلى غيرها ... (*بين القصرين*، ص 123-124)

[No sir, verily my son **does not lift his eyes** to (a female) neighbor or any other one ...]

(4) Of course not, sir. My son **doesn't lift his eyes to look at** a neighbor girl or anyone else. (*Palace Walk*, pp. 128-129)

The English translation above gives the impression that the referent (the speaker's son) walks around with his eyes fixed on the ground, not looking at anyone. In this way, the symbolic physical act (lifting eyes), which is used as an index of politeness, is interpreted literally apart from its metaphorical value. To capture the metaphorical meaning, the translator needs first to function as an insider in the SLC, which enables him/her to process the expression correctly within its own culture, and then functions as an insider in the TLC, which enables him/her to make transparent the metaphorical value of the expression in question. These two conditions met, a rendering such as the one below may be offered:

(5) Of course, sir. My son is **so polite that he wouldn't lift his eyes to look at** a neighbor girl or any other girl for that matter.

Note that this translation takes care of the cultural background that 'lifting eyes to look at girls' is not categorically prohibited; in this context it is linked to a boy's/man's having emotional/sexual intentions, which stereotypically concerns neighbor girls in the Arab culture.

As such, one can conclude that the translator should be an insider in both the SLC and TLC while dealing

with culture-bound expressions. In other words, s/he needs to be an insider in the source culture using his/her knowledge to understand the SL culture-bound expression on the one hand, and be an insider in the target culture to record such an experience of the world in the TL.

The objective of this paper is to work out an emic-etic approach to translating culture-specific expressions from Arabic into English and *vice versa*. Having formulated a clear picture on what emic or insider perspective and etic or outsider perspective exactly mean, in what follows, we will verify the validity of the proposed approach empirically by discussing a number of authentic examples.

3. Data Discussion

To demonstrate the impact of (not) being an insider in both SLC and TLC by adopting an emic-etic approach, let us discuss the following authentic examples to see whether the translators have managed to relay the symbolic level in their translations, or they have just lingered in the bounds of the superficial level. Consider the following rendition offered by Le Gassick and Badawi (1984: 17) in the following extract quoted from Mahfouz's (1961: 11) novel اللص والكلاب *'The Thief and the Dogs'*:

(6) اسكت يا ابن الثعلب.

[Shut up you son of a fox]

(7) Shut up, you cunning bastard.

In this example, the translators have succeeded in being insiders in both the SLC and TLC. In general, the translation of swearing expressions is not an easy task as it "(a) refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatized in the culture; (b) should not be interpreted literally; [and] (c) can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes" (Anderson and Trudigill 1990: 53). Being laden with these two types of constraints, namely cultural constraints imposed by the use of such a culture-specific expression, and norm-imposed constraints, i.e. taking into account the TL reader's expectations, the translators have opted for a combination of both a cultural translation, *'bastard'*, reflecting the swearing act, plus a pragmatic strategy, maintaining the connotative meaning associated with the word *'fox'*, i.e. *'cunning'*. Stylistically speaking, the use of a swearing expression reflects the degree of informality in the text since most of these swearing expressions are extracted from daily life. So, in order to "produce on the audience of the translation the same effect the original text produces on its audience" (Dobao 2004: 223), translators need to reflect the degree of formality as a stylistic feature in the TT, which is another type of constraint. Dobao (2004: 223) comments:

> When the use of swearing or any other form of bad language is so frequent that it becomes a stylistic marker of the text, the equivalence of style becomes as important as the semantic equivalence.

The translation of culture-bound swearing expressions can be very challenging in conversational discourse as the same expression may lend itself to literal translation in one context but not in another. Consider the swearing expression in the two excerpts below:

(8) - كنت قبيل حضورك أتذكر سهرة الأمس وأستعيد منظر الفار وهو يرقص، **الله يقطعه**.

(قصر الشوق، ص 333)

[I was remembering just before you came last night's soiree and recovering al-Far's appearance while he was dancing, **may *Allah* strike him down**]

(9) "Just before you arrive I was remembering last night and what al-Far looked like dancing. **May God strike him down!**" (Palace of Desire, p. 323)

(10) - دعيني أتكلم، لا تقاطعيني، لا تتدخلي فيما لا تفهمين، انتبهي إلى عملك، **الله يقطعك**.
(قصر الشوق، ص 348)

[Let me speak, don't interrupt me, don't interfere in what you don't understand, pay attention to your work, **may Allah strike you down**]

(11) "Let me speak! Don't interrupt me. Don't interfere in things you can't comprehend. Pay attention to your work. May God strike you down!"
(Palace of Desire, p. 337)

Whereas the Arabic swearing expression **الله يقطعه** is intended as a flippant/intimate compliment in reference to the speaker's friend al-Far in the first excerpt, the speaker of the second excerpt intends the same swearing expression as a serious condemnation directed at the interlocutor. Not being aware of that, however, the translators Hutchins and Kenny (1991) have rendered it literally as *'May God strike him down/May God strike you down'* respectively in both cases. On the one hand, if we are to apply the insider/outsider model of cultural translation, we can readily see that the literal option in the first example is completely inappropriate as it could in no way function as a compliment in English. Hence, the translators have failed to function as 'insiders' within the TLC. To do so, they could have offered something like:
(12) "Just before you arrive I was remembering last night and what al-Far looked like dancing. **Hilarious, wasn't he?**"

On the other hand, while the translators in the second excerpt have also functioned as 'outsiders' in the TLC, their literal rendering can, nonetheless, be interpreted as a serious condemnation, thus relaying the cultural value of the swearing expression, though not following the norms of TLC in such contexts. To do so, they could have given something like:
(13) "Let me speak! Don't interrupt me. Don't interfere in things you can't comprehend. Pay attention to your work. **Damn it**!"

One should note that while the cultural mishap in the rendering of the first excerpt cannot be tolerated because it deviates seriously from the intended cultural message, the slight mishap in the translation of the second excerpt can be tolerated taking into account the *skopos* of the translation. That is, some translators may give priority to 'adequacy' over 'acceptability'. Within the insider/outsider cultural model which brings culture to spotlight, the translator also needs to strike a balance between the different constraints in translation activity, in order to do justice to both cultures.

To see how different translators may jeopardize culture-bound expressions in translation, let us consider the two Arabic-into-English renderings below, which involve a Kuwaiti culture-bound element, viz. the concept of 'one-eyed vote' صوت أعور in parliamentary elections. In this scene, a voter reports on what Ali Faraj (a parliamentary candidate) confided in him just before going into the poll room:

(14) - ... he came close to me and whispered in my ear, "Look! I want **a one-eyed vote**". (Al- Maleh and Farghal, 2004: 223)

(15) - ... he came close to me, whispering in my ear, "We want **your vote**".
(Al-Sanousi, 2006)

To first explain the culture-bound expression, a 'one-eyed vote' means exercising only one of the two votes to which a voter is entitled in order to increase the chances of the candidate voted for. So, Ali Faraj wanted the voter to give him a vote and refrain from exercising the other vote. The first rendering opts for a

literal translation of this cultural element, leaving it to the target reader to understand what it means based on the context, which the translators Al-Maleh and Farghal have deemed sufficient for that purpose. Surprisingly, however, in a questionnaire given to 10 native speakers (college students and teachers), only one informant was able to understand the said expression despite the fact that all the informants had copies of the two translations in order to consult the context of this culture-bound expression. What does this mean? Probably, the translator needs to be more transparent when rendering culture-bound expressions by combining local strategies, e.g. literal translation followed by parenthetical definition or paraphrase, thus hitting two birds with one stone. In this example, a parenthetical phrase following the culture-bound expression like (exercising one of the two votes only) would do the job.

What about the other rendering? It was comprehensible and preferable to all the informants although the culture-bound element is completely lost and, consequently, the rendering does not cohere with the surrounding co-text where the voter says that he did not listen to Faraj and exercised the right of two votes, albeit he was influenced by the big favor Faraj did him. As a matter of fact, he tells the reader that his first vote went to another candidate (Mohammed Farhan) while he happily (in the excitement of the said favor) gave the second vote (which he had planned to give to Fahd Al-Jasim) to Faraj. Here, one wonders what happened to this culture-bound element which functions as an important semiotic sign in the ST. This serious under-translation does not only cripple the TT in terms of cultural transfer, but it also distorts the coherence of the translation because it does not logically fit within the surrounding text (for more on this, see Farghal and Al-Masri 2000; Farghal 2004).

The polar opposition between foreignizing and domesticating culture needs to be reconciled in a way that ensures comprehensibility while not compromising cultural elements or, to fall back on Arab proverbial culture, to find a solution whereby *'the wolf does not die and the sheep do not perish'* لا يموت الذئب ولا تفنى الغنم. That is why several translators rethink some of their renderings of culture-bound expressions when they republish their translations. For example, Le Gassick (1966: 26) rendered the Arabic proverb أصوم وأفطر على بصلة [I fast and breakfast on an onion] in N. Mahfouz's novel زقاق المدق *'Midaq Alley'* (1947: 26) as *'I am willing to go on a diet and have just an onion for breakfast'*. The translation sounds as a statement of a decision that deviates seriously from the cultural import, viz. it was uttered by Mrs. Afify as an ironic response reflecting her dissatisfaction with Umm Hamad's suggestion to her to marry an old man (i.e. the worthless onion is meant to stand for the old man). Apart from the mistranslated message, the translator's attempt to domesticate the concept *'fasting'* into *'dieting'* is unsuccessful as the two cultural elements belong to different spheres: religion and health respectively. When Le Gassick republished his translation of the novel in (1975: 20), he changed his translation of the proverb to read *'What, 'break a fast by eating an onion'!'* This emendation, it can be observed, captures both the intended meaning, i.e. the irony, as well as the spirit of the SLC by preserving the religious tinge and revealing the little worth of *'onions'* as a kind of food. In this way, the translator has effectively functioned as an insider in the SLC and as both an insider and an outsider in the TLC. Had he settled for being only an insider in the TLC, he would have offered something like *'What, marry an old man after waiting this long!'* This rendering, however, would relay the intended meaning but, at the same time, compromise the SLC.

The fatalistic nature of the Arab culture also finds its way in English-into-Arabic translation. Many translators tend to introduce *Allah*-featuring expressions into their Arabic translations despite the fact that the SLC usually lacks such expressions. Consider the following examples:

(16) - Bastard: Fair fall the bones that took the pains for me. (*King John*, 1956: 77)

(17) - **وأسأل الله** أن يحسن إلى تلك العظام التي تعبت بحملي. (محمد 1960)

[And **I ask Allah** to reward those bones which tired with my pregnancy]

(18) - Baptesta: Well mayst thou woo, and happy be thy seed. (The Taming of the Shrew, 1953: 8)

(19) - بابتستا: **وفقك الله** في سعيك إليها، وأسعد حظك معها. (قلماوي 1960)

[And **(may) Allah grant you success** in your search for her, and (may) Him grant you good luck with her]

As can be observed in the two examples above, the translators have introduced a religious coloring that is normative in the TLC in such speech acts. The two translations are both adequate and acceptable: they relay the intended messages in the most natural way by employing Arabic formulaic expressions, thus succeeding in being insiders in both cultures (for more examples, see Aziz, 1999). However, one should caution against the exaggeration in coloring an Arabic translation with a fatalistic perspective that does not exist in the English original. For example, Jaber (2013: 207-225) shows that Munīr Ba'albakī's Arabic translations of English literary masterpieces in the sixties and seventies frequently fall back on Islamic religious resources such as the *Quran* and *Hadīth*, thus misrepresenting the SLC and, at the same time, giving the target readers an erroneous impression about the original. While he attributes this to the requirements of that period and the Islamic education of the Arab writers then, he calls for the retranslation of these classics in light of recent translation theories and thinking where a more balanced treatment of culture would be offered.

One should note that translating from a liberal Anglo-American culture into a conservative Arab culture exposes culture-bound elements to ample domestication. To give but one area where such a practice may be clearly noticed, let us look at what happens to references to alcoholic drinks in an Arabic translation of Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* (1860/2013):

(20) - As soon as I emptied my pocket he started forcing the food I brought into his mouth, pausing only to take some of the **whisky**.

(21) - ... حتى شرع الرجل في التهام الطعام الذي أحضرته، وكان لا يتوقف إلا ليرتشف بعضاً من **العصير**.

[... the man started swallowing the food which she brought, and he didn't stop except for sipping some **juice**]

(22) - I have brought you, madam, **a bottle of white wine** and I have brought, madam, **a bottle of red wine**.

(23) - لقد أحضرت لك سيدتي احتفالاً بهذه المناسبة، **كعكة شوكالاتة**، كما أحضرت لك سيدتي **كعكة قشدة**.

[I brought for you madam celebrating this occasion, **a chocolate cake**, also I brought for you madam **a cream cake**]

(24) - We ate very well, and after dinner **a bottle of choice fine old wine** was placed.

(25) - أكلنا جيداً، وبعد تناول الغداء، وضعت **قدحاً من القهوة**.

[We ate well, and after eating lunch, she placed **a coffee pot**]

The replacement of alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic ones or omitting them in the Arabic translation is a clear insider's perspective. One would not expect this practice to operate the other way round. For example, it would be very unlikely for the translator of Arabic into English to replace reference to القهوة 'coffee' with reference to 'wine' in an English translation. Thus, this unidirectional domestication of such cultural elements is largely controlled by the parameter of liberal vs. conservative cultures. The liberality of the Anglo-American culture is manifested in several other areas such as sexual and religious matters, which are often a target for domestication when translating them into Arabic.

Cultural elements may involve subtleties that may escape translators or land them into misrepresentation of the SLC. Let us look at an example from Rjaa Alsanea's (2005) novel بنات الرياض *'Girls of Riyadh'*, which was translated into English by the author and Marilyn Booth (2007). The narrator (p. 55) wonders whether there is a correlation between high social classes and Saudi girls' lack of sense of humor and merriness the way people believe there is a correlation between fatness and a good sense of humor. The ST makes no reference to the complexion of these girls. Looking at the translation (p. 51), we can see a clear reference to the dullness of upper-class blondies. Given the setting of the narration (Riyadh), the insider's perspective as manifested in the use of 'blondies' is clearly incongruent with the Saudi culture in particular and the Arab culture at large. This would be comparable to talking about Romeo and Juliet living in a tent set up in the middle of the desert. Besides, the main stereotypical attribute of 'blondies' in the Anglo-American culture is 'dumbness', which is completely irrelevant in the SLC. On the contrary, the Arab culture highly values this complexion in terms of beauty. In this way, what is meant in the ST to correlate with gender (females) and social class is erroneously portrayed as involving complexion.

Our last example below relates to gestures, which may be interpreted differently between Arabic and English:

(26) اقترب منها وجلس **ومدت يدها تربت على رأسه**. (الشطي، ص 18 في السنعوسي 2006)

[He approached her and sat down and she extended her hand **patting on his head**]

(27) He [a child] went close to her and **she put her hand on his head**.
(Al Sanousi, 2006)

In the Arab culture, an adult's gesture to 'pat a child on the head' signifies compassion and reassurance to the child. Despite the fact that the translator Al Sanousi, being a university professor of Arabic, understands what the gesture stands for in the Kuwaiti culture, she turns an emotionally-laden gesture into a mere physical act 'putting her hand on the child's head', which carries no social significance in the TLC. Even if the rendering were changed to a socially interpretable gesture, viz. 'patting the child on the head', it would still be incongruent with the norms in the Anglo-American culture as the functionally corresponding gesture is 'patting the child on the back' rather than 'on the head'. Thus, the translator needs to pay utmost attention to the social meaning of the gesture in the SLC, as well as the normative way of performing it in the TLC.

4. Conclusion

The above discussion sheds light on the translator's efforts to capture cultural subtleties while trying to finalize his/her renderings of culture-bound expressions. After probing the deep symbolic levels of the language in the ST and trying to understand the cultural implications meant by the author, the translator's work is automatically slowed down in an attempt to decide on the available local strategies that would reflect such cultural issues in the TL in a way that language and content will allow the TL reader to interact in parallel fashion to the source text reader. This goal may be achieved only when the translator can strike a balance between playing the roles of 'insider' and 'outsider' properly with respect to the two cultures in question. The authentic illustrations given in this study are but a small taste of what might happen when translators encounter culture-bound elements in their work.

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